**Solomon’s Advice for Dying with Dignity**

An English Physician once said, “Set your shoulder joyously to the world’s wheel: you may spare yourself some unhappiness if, beforehand, you slip the Book of Ecclesiastes beneath your arm”

We’ve already spent 16 Sundays going through the book of Ecclesiastes and we still have a couple more to go. During that time, we’ve repeatedly emphasised the meaning of the book, we’ve discussed various topics ranging from money and poverty, work, overwork and laziness, we’ve looked at God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, we’ve glanced at happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain and glared at life and death.

As mentioned, multiple times before, the book of Ecclesiastes scares a lot of people and even more misinterpret it. Many see this book as a pessimistic commentary on life. Others take from the book that they must just enjoy life and neglect all other aspects of life. Both these approaches and views are wrong.

The book of Ecclesiastes plays a very important role in the life and traditions of both ancient and modern-day Jews. This book is traditionally read on the third day of the **Feast of Tabernacles**, which occurs in late September or early October. It is during the time of a harvest festival that this book would be read aloud in Synagogues. And I quote, “The fact that it is read during a festival of great joy should be a clue that the tone of the book is not considered by Judaism, at least, as pessimistic.” – Dr William D. Barrick.

The book of Ecclesiastes scares some people because it deals with facts and truths that are uncomfortable for most of us. Solomon’s does not allow us to keep ourselves ignorant of the raw realities of life. Solomon takes a crowbar and forces open our eyelids to the reality of life in a Genesis three world and ultimately death. All of us have been raised in a culture where we were told that one does not speak about uncomfortable topics or topics that we label, “controversial”. We’ve been raised to believe that one must never speak of politics and religion, but I want to attest that the result of years gone by without people engaging in uncomfortable topics like politics and religion has left our society ignorant of both. In this book, Solomon doesn’t allow us to escape the uncomfortable. He confronts us with, baptises us in and forces us to see this world for what is really is. But Solomon does not do that from a nihilistic perspective that nothing matters, he does so from a heavenly perspective, by reminding us throughout the book that we merely live this life in preparation of the next and in the very last verses that one day we will have to give an account to God for how we lived our lives on this earth.

As mentioned before, the key to unlocking the book of Ecclesiastes is Ecclesiastes 1 verse 13: “**And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**”, and as already stated, that phrase, *“children of man”* is best translated as children of the man, or the Adam. In other words, **“It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of Adam to be busy with”**. This verse, along with many similar verses throughout the book draws a direct line from what Solomon is saying here to what happened in Genesis chapter three. In the first two chapters of Genesis God created everything and everything was good. In chapter three-man sins, and God curses mankind and all creation. The result of the curse is decay and death. Not immediate death, but death by decay. Along with the curse of death, man’s relationship with creation is also cursed. No longer shall man be able to find fulfilment in work and for as long as mankind is to work on the earth, the earth will oppose mankind and fight mankind. Let’s read Genesis chapter three verses 14 to 19:

14 The Lord God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,

cursed are you above all livestock

and above all beasts of the field;

on your belly you shall go,

and dust you shall eat

all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and her offspring;

he shall bruise your head,

and you shall bruise his heel.”

16 To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;

in pain you shall bring forth children.

Your desire shall be contrary to[f] your husband,

but he shall rule over you.”

17 And to Adam he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife

and have eaten of the tree

of which I commanded you,

‘You shall not eat of it,’

cursed is the ground because of you;

in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your face

you shall eat bread,

till you return to the ground,

for out of it you were taken;

for you are dust,

and to dust you shall return.”

This is the world that we are born into, this is the world that Solomon was born into. Because of the sin of Adam and sinfulness of our hearts, this world and this life is cursed, cursed by God. What was at first paradise, became purgatory and what was at first fulfilling became consuming.

This is the reality of the life and world we live in. There is no arguing, there is no fighting it. You may wish not to think of it, but it will not cease to be reality. Solomon’s advice throughout the book is not to ignore or wish away the reality of living in a Genesis three world, but to accept that reality in the light of God’s mercy, blessings, and grace. You see, even in Genesis three, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and God was cursing mankind, the serpent and creation in the midst of his curses he promises deliverance. In the midst of his anger, he remembers grace. Remember verse 15? In verse 15, which many theologians call the Proto-euangelion, the first gospel or rather, the first reference or promise of the gospel, God promises a deliverer that will crush the serpent. So, Solomon understood that we live in a world buckling under the weight of God’s curse, but that God is at the same time a gracious and merciful God. It is from this perspective that Solomon writes.

Solomon urges his readers to see life in this cursed world for what it is, futile and vain. Nothing you do for this life in this world will last and because of that, nothing you do in this life for this life matters. We are to live wholeheartedly for the life that is to come, for the eternal life, and in doing so, God graciously grants us gifts and blessings to enjoy and cope with our lives in this world.

So, in other words, **we do not live for this world, because this world is decaying and dying, and so are we at an even faster pace. We must live our lives in this world with the sole purpose of preparing for the next and in doing so, God grants us happiness to enjoy this life.** If you live this life for God, you have God as your friend, your ally and your Father. To quote Dr. Barrick again: *“Only by accepting the reality and naturalness of death, can a person face life with the kind of joy that Solomon encourages in the enjoyment passages (cp. 9:2–10 and 11:7–10). For the wise believer, contentment with the brevity of life produces a freedom for living the life God gives in His service and for His glory. Ryken reminds his readers that aging and death consist of “some of the hardest experiences in life. The Bible is honest about this, but not bitter.” The psalmist speaks of the death of God’s saints as precious in His estimation (Ps 116:15)”*, Psalm 116:15: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.*

And so, with all of that said, let’s read Ecclesiastes chapter 12 and afterwards, pray together **[READ ECCLESIASTES 12]**

**[PRAY]**

Ecclesiastes 12 is Solomon’s conclusion to the sermon. It is the closing thoughts and closing words of a man who has examined all areas of life and experienced all that can be experienced. Chapter 12 once again deals with the concept or topic of death. But this chapter is unique. This chapter is a poetic masterpiece. As someone who loves poetry and loves to read poetry it is my opinion that this chapter is probably one of the most magnificent, awe-inspiring, amazing pieces of literature, and that is just speaking from a literary point of view, we’ve not even begun to mention to theological eloquence of this passage.

This morning we will only be looking at the first seven verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 12. I’ve titled this morning’s sermon, **Solomon’s Advice for Dying with Dignity**. These seven verses have to do with dying. These seven verses are the beginning of the end of Solomon’s twelve chapter long sermon and in this passage we will be confronted with the inescapable reality of death. The truth is all of must die and all of us will die. There is no escaping that. God has ordained it to be so, and so the only thing that is left for us, as Solomon emphasises in this passage, **is dying with dignity**. Dying in a way that brings honour to God and rest to your soul. And so, in this passage we will see **THREE COMMANDMENTS FOR DYING WITH DIGNITY**.

It’s poetic that Solomon ends his sermon with the concept of death, as death is the end of anything that had a start. These seven verses in Hebrew are written as one sentence. So, everything you read in chapter 12 verse 1 up until verse 7 was written as one sentence. One commentator points out the poetic nature of this passage by observing that it difficult for a person to read these 7 verses as one sentence in one breath. By the time the reader gets to the end of the passage he’d be out of breath just like a person who is dying or has died would have no breath in them.

The passage can be divided into three sections each section starting with the word *“before”*. The first section being found in verse one, **“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come”**, the second section can be found in verses 2 to 5, **“before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened”**, and the last section can be found in verses 6 and 7, **“before the silver cord is snapped”**. And so, let’s start at the beginning. **THE FIRST COMMANDMENT FOR DYING WITH DIGNITY IS:**

**REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR IN DIFFICULTY** – **Verse One [READ]**

*Before you can have a death worth dying, you must first have lived a life worth living.* The passage starts with the words *Remember also*. This refers back to the previous discussion we had in chapter 11, more specifically about not wasting your youth or the time you have left. So, these two words, *Remember also*, help us to link chapter 11’s flow with chapter 12. Solomon continues the theme of not wasting your youth or the time you have left by stating: **Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth**. This is the central command that Solomon gives us. In short, **remember God**, do not forget him. But Solomon does not specifically just mention God or the Covenant name of God Yahweh here. He mentions God as the Creator. This again is Solomon taking us back to Genesis. He ends his book by reminding us of the first book. By this point is shouldn’t surprise us anymore. The foundation of Ecclesiastes is Genesis. One theologian makes the point that the term *Creator* is used so that no one can be excluded. If God’s covenant name was used, you could make the argument that this is only applicable to Israel, but because God is mentioned as the *Creator*, it means that this command does not exclude anyone, in side or outside Israel.

**Solomon gives the instruction that we are the remember our Creator**. In order for us to remember our Creator, we must first know who he is. Solomon’s usage of the word *remember* does not merely mean that we must have a vague notion of God or just be mindful of his existence. No, Solomon is emphasising that we must know our Creator and by knowing him, we will be able to remember him in difficult times. By reminding us that God is our Creator, Solomon is reminding us that he is the source of our existence as we read in Revelation 4:11: ***“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”*** God not only created us, but he is the one that sustains us. We must remember our Creator because it is from him that we get our breath and life and being. God is the one who provides the food for the day and the energy for work and the capacity to engage. It is foolish to try and life this life without acknowledging your Creator and more importantly, relying on him for strength, comfort and encouragement. The Creator is also you sustainer.

Solomon encourages us to *Remember our Creator in the days of our youth*. You might read this as an older person and think this does not apply to you anymore, but it still does. Like mentioned last time, you may not be a youngling anymore, but you are still younger than others out there. We should take this to mean that we must *Remember our Creator in the time we have left* and the sooner the safer. We all know the proverb that states, the best time to plant a tree is 20-years ago, the second best time is now. Don’t go wasting time thinking about all the time you could have spent with God if only you had a relationship with him sooner. That time is gone and will never return, all you have left is now and the days ahead. So while you are in the here and now, know God. So that you can remember him in the difficult days ahead.

Solomon continues this first section: **“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”;”** Solomon reminds us that difficult days will come. It is not a matter of if, but when. Days will come when we will be plucked out of our comfort zones and placed in fiery trials and tested through difficulty and possibly even suffering. It just a matter of time. Those evil days will come. It is in those days that we must remember our Creator, but even more importantly, it is before those days come that we must already know our Creator. If you have a relationship with God, you know that you can trust him. If you are in Christ, you can know that everything will workout for your good. If you are in Christ you can count it all joy when trials come, when those evil days come, because if you are in Christ, those evil days are a means that God uses to form you more into the image of Christ.

For all mankind, life is suffering and then death. All that is left is for us to die with dignity. We can die with dignity when we have trusted Christ our Creator through thick and thin. During the good days and the bad days. Please note dearly beloved, that God uses the good days to give us rest and prepare us for the evil days ahead. If you are experiencing a season in your life where everything is fine and you have little or no trials, do not become slack. It is God providing you with rest, a pitstop before you continue with the race. During this peaceful time, prepare! Prepare for battle, prepare for war because the evil days lay ahead. Root yourself in your spiritual disciplines. Pray, read your Bible, share the gospel, disciple your family so that when the evil days come you have built your house on the ROCK and you will be able to withstand those evil days by remembering your Creator.

That brings us to our second section:

**REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR WHILE DECAYING – Verse 2 to 5 [READ]**

Verse two starts by once again reminding us of the creation account in the book of Genesis. Specifically, the mention and separation of sun, light and moon. If you remember, in Genesis 1, the light brought about by God is a light separate from the sun and the moon as they were created later. Some take this to have some sort of Eschatological meaning to it, but it is very unlikely. As you will see in the following verses, Solomon is most likely referring to aging, using creation as an example. If creation is aging and wearing down, as we know the scientific principle of entropy proves and Revelation reveals to us, how much faster are we not aging and wearing out? If you think about it, the universe is getting older and decaying, but it still lasts longer than billions of humans that have lived and died. But it will one day come to its full age.

So when it comes to the rest of the passage, there are two schools of thought about the interpretation of the pictures used in the language of this section. In my opinion both are very likely and possible interpretations and because of that, I’ll share both with you. Despite having two schools of interpretation on this passage, both schools of interpretation come to the same conclusion or meaning of the passage. The sections, verses 2 to 5 is about the agonizing process of becoming old. In other words, decaying.

One school of interpretation takes this passage to represent four classes of people that can be found in verse 3. Those people being, keepers of the house, who are male slaves, the strong men, who are freemen or landowners, then two classes of females, the grinders, being slave women and those who are in the houses, the freewomen. All of them are referenced in the context of a person in the community that died and they are busy mourning or the community itself is dying.

The other school of interpretation states that these pictures refer to body parts of a person that decays with age. The keepers of the house referring to the arms, the strong men referring to the legs, grinders referring to the teeth and those who look through the window referring to the eyes. In this interpretation, the focus is still on getting old and decaying.

The reason both these interpretations come to the same conclusion, apart from the obvious language of aging that is used in verse 3 and 4 is the explicit references to aging in verses 5 and 6. Verse 5 starts with the words, **“they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way”**, this is an idiom or metaphor referring to a person that afraid of heights and how the body responds when faced with that fear. Very often the body freezes and is out of breath, unable to move or do anything. The blossoming of the almond tree gives the blossoms a white, greyish colour that reminds a person of the whiteness of hair in old age. The grasshopper is mentioned as dragging itself along. When locust become too old and they do not have the vigour or strength to jump or flew around, they often just kick and drag themselves around on the ground until they die.

This section emphasises the difficulties that come with aging. Growing old is not for the faint of heart. Tomorrow you will be expected to complete the same responsibilities as today, the only difference is you will be older and a little bit weaker. Being old is a struggle.

Solomon advises that you know your Creator before you grow old, before you decay. In other words, as soon as possible. The sooner you grow in God and mature in Christ, the more ready and equipped you will be for the decaying days. Growing old is a reality, it is a fact. There is no getting around it. Only in Christ will you be able to withstand the pressures and lures of this world. Only in Christ can you live an anxiety free life because you know that he cares for you and he will keep and protect you and only in Christ will you escape the lures of this world that want to capture you and keep you busy with all manners of vanity. If you get to know God before the day of decay, you will be able to remember him while you decay. And the good news? God will remember you. If you honour him, he will honour you.

There is no better reason for us as young people to through ourselves wholeheartedly unto Jesus. We must delve into the faith and study and pray and evangelize and disciple and equip. We must do so now while we are young, while we have strength and before the day of decay comes. We must know God so that when the waves of trials come, we can stand firm on the foundation that is Jesus Christ, trusting fully in God as he goes before us, and behind us, and above and below us and most precious of all, in us. We must make it our unrelenting habit to place our trust in Christ and so continually. Not our sanctification, not our progress, not our results but in Christ and Christ alone. We must do so daily, that it becomes a reflex, muscle memory burned into our brains, that our default reaction to any situation in life is to cling to Christ the Son of God. He is enough.

And so, this brings us to our last section. As this one sentence long, seven verse section progresses from difficulties in life, to decaying in life, the next natural progression in death of life. So, Solomon’s last command for dying with dignity is:

**REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR IN DEATH – Verse 6 and 7 [READ]**

Where the first verse in the section starts with God as the Creator, the last verse in the section ends with God as the Collector. The silver cord or golden bowl both refer to a lamp or a light holding object. The cord referring to a bowl that is suspended from the roof. Despite being silver it snapped and the bowl containing the oil and fire fell to the floor or is gone. Like our lives, it doesn’t matter how luxurious or how achieving it might be, the cord will snap. We are destined to die. There is no getting around it. Despite the bowl being golden, it will still be broken. Everything you did for this life, if not done for Christ will not last, it is destined to perish, we are destined to perish.

Solomon continues to reference two other examples, the pitcher, and the wheel. Both objects are mentioned in the context of water. Just like water is a life-giving substance, it cannot extend our lives beyond the allotted time. The pitcher will break, the wheel will shatter, all must come to and end.

Solomon then ends his poetic master piece of sentence off by once again referring to Genesis, Genesis chapter three. He reminds us of the reason all of this is reality. The reason we will have difficult days and the reason we decay and the reason we die is because of the curse. The curse being the result of our sin.

Some might think that this is harsh, but it is not, it is grace. It would have been completely fair if God sent Adam and Eve and all their future decedents directly into hell for refusing to obey and trust God. It would have been an act of righteousness from the most High God. Instead, God shows grace. Amidst anger, he remembers mercy. He allows us to live our lives on Earth, not free of the consequences of our sin, but also not completely removed from. God even goes further, promising to send a saviour that will one day restore all things as they are meant to be, in fact he will make things better than they were. We can look forward to a new heaven and a new earth in the coming future not because we have suffered enough or deserve it, but because of God’s grace. If Christ Jesus had not become man and lived the life we could never live and die the death that we deserved, we would have no hope.

So while we wait for the promise of the new heaven and the new earth, we can rest in the fact that whatever happens to us here on earth, at the end of it all, our spirits return to God. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away blessed be the name of the Lord.

And so, I want to quote Dr. Barrick again: *“Only by accepting the reality and naturalness of death, can a person face life with the kind of joy that Solomon encourages in the enjoyment passages (cp. 9:2–10 and 11:7–10). For the wise believer, contentment with the brevity of life produces a freedom for living the life God gives in His service and for His glory. Ryken reminds his readers that aging and death consist of “some of the hardest experiences in life. The Bible is honest about this, but not bitter.”*

In closing, allow me to offer you three pieces of advice from a book titled *The Ragged Edge* with regards to these seven verses, this one sentence:

1. **You must face the fact that you are not getting younger.** Use that reality to motivate you. Christ rose from the dead, but we sometimes can’t even rise from our beds. We waste time. Get done what needs to get done, carry the momentary burdens of those around you. Love your family, honour God. You are not getting any younger. The second piece of advice:
2. **God has designed you to be empty without him.** The reason so many people never end in their search for the meaning of life is because they try to find that meaning inside themselves. We were not created to focus or live inward or for ourselves. We were created for the worship and enjoyment of the Most High God and for serving one another. And lastly:
3. **Now is the time to prepare for eternity.** Do not take the here and now for granted. Trust Christ, grab a hold of him! Grab him and never let go. Do not think that you will be given a period of extended grace in the future if you at this very moment reject the gracious hand of God. As long as it is today repent. Many of you might be spiritually down. Maybe your tired of trying to be a Christian because every time you fail. Every time you fall into sin. Allow me to read to you from the 1689 Baptist Confession: The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does oftentimes leave for a season his own children to many temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to reveal to them their weakness and corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support on him; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy ends. So that whatsoever befalls any of his elect is by his appointment, for his glory, and their good. ( 2 Chronicles 32:25, 26, 31; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9; Romans 8:28). The mark of a faithful Christian is not one that never sins, but one that always believes. Our struggle in this life is not against sin, our struggle to keep the faith. It is this very reason that Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the prodigal son. You struggling Christian are already a sheep of his, you are already his son. Despite losing way and getting lost, if you place you faith in the Shepherd and the Father, you will be found, you will be forgiven. The fact of the matter is we will all die. Will you die with dignity in Christ? If that is your desire know God and remember him, and he will remember you!

**KEEP THE FAITH! BELIEVE IN CHRIST AND REST IN THE GRACE OF GOD! AMEN**